

Aesthetics, Applications, Artistry and Anarchy: Essays in Prehistoric and Contemporary Art

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Pre-Columbian Rock Art and Sensitive Cognition

Reinaldo Morales Jr.¹ and Howard Risatti²

1. Associate Professor of Art History, Department of Art, University of Central Arkansas, 201 Donaghey Ave., MAC 101, Conway, Arkansas, 72035 USA. RMorales@uca.edu (UCA Gmail)

2. Emeritus Professor of Art History, Department of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University, 922 W. Franklin, P.O. Box 843046, Richmond, Virginia, 23284 USA hrisatti@vcu.org

Abstract. Pre-Columbian rock art is still not considered by many as a form of aesthetic expression, and many still do not consider rock art as art. These ideas seem to be sustained by popular notions about the nature of aesthetics and art that have had a particularly unfortunate impact on the study of non-Western and prehistoric art. There seems to be a general acceptance of the Kantian idea that aesthetic expression is about the beautiful, and this has come to define the aesthetic for most people today. In the long shadow of this modernity—a distinctly Kantian Modernity, with a marketplace that reinforces these expectations of art and aesthetic expression—pre-Columbian rock art can indeed seem out of place, even unwanted. But if we consider the critical heritage of Alexander Baumgarten, who coined the term *aesthetics* and was writing a generation before Kant, we find an aesthetic theory that better reflects art's historical condition. When it is seen in terms of Baumgarten's 'science of sensitive cognition' we gain a much richer formal and aesthetic understanding of pre-Columbian rock art.

Keywords. art, aesthetics, pre-Columbian rock art, Alexander Baumgarten, Brazil, Caribbean

Introduction

A theory of art should be open to all art, including pre-Columbian rock art. It should be able to engage the good and the bad, the easy and the complicated, the extraordinary and the everyday. A theory of art shouldn't just obsess over the most recent fine art of First World markets at the exclusion of all other art. But it should also discriminate enough to be meaningful. Not just anything can be art. For example, art requires artifactuality and intentionality. Moreover, a work need not be intended solely for the fine art gallery for it to be art, but there is some expectation that *art work* is different than just *work*. Where we draw that line, or if we even think a line can be drawn, says a lot about what we expect from *art*. When we consider very old art from cultures vastly different than our own we must be very careful to expect nothing more than is reasonable.

But we can reasonably expect quite a lot. Europeans encountered sophisticated and thriving artworlds in the Americas upon first contact. It is reasonable to expect rock art was also part of many sophisticated and thriving artworlds before contact. We know the pitfalls of inappropriately comparing artworlds without honest and careful consideration of indigenous sensitivities; after all, political, social, religious, and intellectual ideas form the basis of art production and reception. So in order to propose that the production, reception and criticism of art existed in the prehistoric Americas, we need to be honest about how broadly art intersects all of our lives. And we need to understand the most difficult phenomenon to track through prehistory: the

aesthetic response. Art and aesthetics go together; an art theory must therefore also address aesthetics.

This essay summarizes art and aesthetics and argues that these are not inventions of the European Enlightenment, but very persistent and ubiquitous categories of human existence. In order to fairly evaluate the possibility of aesthetics in ancient American rock art production and reception, we need to move beyond the unfortunate habits of framing art as just 'something pretty to hang on a wall' as Stephen H. Lekson (2008: 328, n. 68) argues. And we need to move beyond limiting aesthetics to mere appreciation and disinterested contemplation of beauty for its own sake, as Irene J. Winter (2002) and others argue. Not only is rock art *art*, but it also enjoyed significant aesthetic dimensions from time to time, like a lot of other art from a lot of other places and periods. Paintings from Northeast Brazil and engravings from the Caribbean illustrate two traditions where we may see sophisticated aesthetic considerations at work in visually affective examples of pre-Columbian art.

Art or Not-Art?

We can start with the reasonable and conventional premise that an object is a work of art if it engenders an aesthetic response. However, our cultural background is key to how we respond. With rock art and other works from different cultures about whom we know little, this is difficult because we either don't have an aesthetic response or we have one based on our culture's terms. Some critics confront this difficulty with the premise that prehistoric and non-Western

work—like pre-Columbian rock art—is not supposed to be viewed *aesthetically*, perhaps because it was made before these societies had entered the ‘Era of Art’ (à la Belting 1994). Such oppositions to rock art as *art* are well known (Morales 2005a).

Many people who do not see rock art as *art* and do not consider it a significant form of aesthetic expression reflect long-standing attitudes toward prehistoric and non-Western works. They characterize such work as non-art or pre-art because they view it as foreign to any work or concept related to *art* in our modern world. They argue art is not a ‘universal category of human existence’ (White 1992: 538), that, according to some prehistorians, it is rare in the long history of humanity; and that art is only a recent phenomenon of the Western First World. This critical trend contends that the aesthetic response is a *transcendental* exploration (Tomášková 1997), and thus art exists *apart* from the everyday (utilitarian) concerns of life and living. Art is a cultural phenomenon ‘that is assumed to function in what we recognize and even *carve off separately* as the aesthetic sphere’ (Soffer and Conkey 1997: 2; emphasis added). Art is limited to the *objet d’art* designed for the disinterested contemplation of the beautiful, and thus cannot account for the production and reception of rock art.

Rather than allowing these popular opinions about art and its lack in the pre-Columbian Americas to limit the range of works we study as *art*, we instead seek to expose the multicultural and eternal nature of art by demonstrating the strengths of more inclusive notions of art and the aesthetic response. This more reasonably reflects the historical condition of art as most people have known it for most of time and makes the resulting analyses of old and new art far more rewarding. While this perspective takes the long view of history, it is critically grounded in the contemporary artworld by necessity. Much of what *art* means to us today is generated and warped by the contemporary artworld marketplace, and much of this contemporary artworld marketplace would seem a complete anathema to the world of pre-Columbian rock art production and reception. The first thing we need to do is to reconcile conflicting notions about the nature of aesthetic responses.

Kantian Beauty and Art’s Uselessness

Most students of aesthetics typically trace its Western beginnings back to the ancient world and the Platonic tradition. Plotinus, for example, contrasted things known through rational processes (intellectual, *noetic*) and things known through the senses (sensate, *aesthetic*) in his discussion of the soul and the body in the *Fourth Ennead* (Aschenbrenner and Holther 1954). We also see a sophisticated aesthetic discourse at work centuries earlier, in third millennium B.C. Mesopotamian art, as Irene J. Winter (2002) has convincingly demonstrated.

For the Sumerians and Akkadians qualities such as grace, luminosity and awesome power were important aesthetic considerations in their evaluation of their art. These are qualities, we might note, that reflect social and political attitudes that exist outside the work but are expressed through the work.

It wasn’t until the eighteenth century that we saw our modern notion of aesthetics codified. In 1790 Immanuel Kant bent the arc of Western aesthetic theory toward the beautiful and toward judgments of disinterested taste. Because, for Kant, aesthetic judgement is based on the beautiful, and because the capacity for beauty only exists in the non-useful, non-functional, we are left with an aesthetic theory whose object we carve off separately from the world of useful objects (à la Soffer and Conkey 1997). This follows the admonition attributed to Leonardo da Vinci that ‘utility cannot be beauty’ (Risatti 2007: 217). An object might be a work of art because it engenders an aesthetic response, but such a response relegates the object to the realm of the non-useful (just ‘something pretty to hang on a wall,’ following Lekson’s critique).

This is the Kantian twist that reinforces the perception of art as somehow removed from everyday life, elevated to the level of disinterestedness, or concerned with some contemplative search for the beautiful (as in Tomášková 1997). That was not a fair characterization of art in eighteenth century Europe, nor a fair characterization of art today, nor is it a fair characterization of art for most people for most of time. We deserve a reminder of what art actually is, and how we came to lose sight of that.

When we say that an object is a *work of art* if it engenders an aesthetic response, we mean *art* with a lowercase *a*—‘for *Art* with a capital *A* has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish’ as E. H. Gombrich (1950: 5) wrote in the mid-20th century. This *art* includes not just the fine art of the museums, galleries, and auction houses, it also includes fine and utilitarian craft, and all manner of fine and commercial design and architecture. This catholic approach deserves emphasis, because many critics of rock art as *art* only think of *fine art* when issues of art and culture arise. Not all art is fine art. Calling some arts *fine arts* only came to us from the late eighteenth century (Risatti 2007: 71). The result has been that pottery, textiles, furniture, jewelry, tattoos, and commercial and decorative graphic design could not compete with the *fine* or *high arts* of painting, sculpture and monumental architecture for the critical attention of Enlightenment aestheticians, and were thus relegated to the category *minor* or *low arts*.

Consequently, those low arts could not compete for the excessive commissions of extremely wealthy patrons, whose conspicuously generous support of their

artworlds was to establish and entrench what could be called a high art vs. low art aesthetic apartheid. Modern counterparts include the twenty-first century artworlds of the New York and London gallery systems. And it is these same systems that reinforce the idea that art equates to something for elite tastes, or for those whose social or academic pedigree allows them the transcendental experience only such art can offer. These are the artworlds of the blockbuster collections, the Art Stars, and the £50 million diamond-studded platinum skulls.

For example, the *New York Daily News* reported that the November 13, 2013 'Contemporary Art Evening Auction' at Christie's in New York City broke single auction records by bringing in \$691.5 million (Associated Press 2013). The highlight was the sale of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies of Lucien Freud* (1967) for \$142.4 million after six minutes of bidding. The next day, Sotheby's in New York City sold a 1963 canvas by Andy Warhol, *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*, for \$105.4 million. Apparently the work had only been seen once in public in the last quarter century. Nonetheless, it broke the previous record of \$71.7 million for a Warhol—who critic Donald Kuspit considers a 'postartist aesthetic manager' (Kuspit 2004: 197, n.76), rather than an artist. With staggering waves of capital from Asia, the Near East and Russia playing a more important role than ever, it is a global *nouveau mega-riche* feeding this beast we call an art market.

The Artworld and Artworlds

The *art* at the heart of this artworld is not the art most of us 'mere' humans are familiar with. This is the stuff of legend. The artworld of the Chelsea and Mayfair gallery marketplace is a different artworld than that of the marketplace for the logos and posters used by Manhattan or London restaurants and pubs; we cannot treat one like the other. We would not confuse the critical discourse surrounding portraits in the Whitney Museum of American Art or in London's National Portrait Gallery, for example, with the discourse associated with the family portraits in Bronx apartments or in the pubs on Fleet Street. Each of these artworlds have their own art and art-related expectations, and their own traditions of art-related discourse.

Arthur C. Danto (1964) gave us the notion of the *Artworld* while trying to reconcile a lot of New Art into an Old Masters critical paradigm. For Danto the artworld is the matrix which makes works we call *art* possible. This matrix includes artists, patrons, art critics, collectors, galleries, museums, and so on, but most importantly for Danto, 'the theories and the histories of the Artworld' (1964: 584). So for critic and aesthetician Arthur C. Danto, the role of the critic or aesthetician is a necessary condition for art to exist. George Dickie (2004) mostly

agreed and defined the elements of this art theory-driven matrix in his 'new institutional theory of art.' In short: 'A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public' (Dickie 2004: 58).

The circularity of Danto and Dickie's use of *art*, *artist* and *artworld* each to define the other is, of course, unsatisfying. But theirs are among the most thoughtful and resilient attempts to define the indefinable. It exposes the problem of seeking definitions for the word *art*, but only hints at the problems of claiming the work of non-Western peoples as *art*. This is because Danto's artworld requires 'the theories and the histories of the Artworld' (1964: 584), thus the role of the critic or aesthetician becomes that of a gatekeeper, a sort of ultimate authority on interestingness. The '*Art*' *Because We Say So* attitude suggested, at times, by these institutional theories rubs many of us the wrong way (e.g. Brook 1992; Faris 1988) and smacks of colonialist elitism (the aesthetic apartheid mentioned above). Carolyn Dean, for example, fears that when we apply this method of defining art, 'we risk re-creating societies in the image of the modern West, or rather, in the image of the modern West but just different enough to render them lesser or insufficient, or more primitive' (Dean 2006: 26).

As has been the case for most of modernity, our art theories still seem to favor the elite, sometimes difficult, usually expensive fine art of the commercial gallery and academy driven artworlds. But that is only one side of fine art, and fine art is only one side of art. There are many other artworlds, and there probably always have been. The artworld of the high-end galleries and blockbuster exhibitions is only the cash-encrusted tip of a much larger world of everyday art for everyday people. A half century after Gombrich warned us not to miscontextualize all art as Art, it seems we still need reminding. This is especially true in the study of prehistoric rock art (Morales 2005a).

When we understand that only some art is fine art and most is not, we see more clearly how art is part of our everyday lives and has been for a very long time. Only some art is intended for the disinterested contemplation of the transcendental nature of beauty (or of humanity, or of God). Very little of the art around us, in fact, exists only to provide 'the means for an exploration of transcendental aesthetic quality, the attribute that must infuse any such piece to provide it with meaning' (Tomášková 1997: 269). This exploration might be required of a diamond-studded platinum skull in a Mayfair gallery, or of a reclining Venus in the Musée d'Orsay, but it is not required of the coffee mug in my hand or my faculty portrait on the university website.

Most of our art carries meaning without any disinterested transcendental exploration. Most of our

art operates outside any semiotically contested space; rarely do our everyday arts require deconstructing. Commonly used things can be art (and can even inspire a significant aesthetic response) without compromising their usefulness, without relegating them to a purely contemplative function or banishment to a museum (as we would instead expect that of *fine art*). Not all art needs to be curated. Most just gets used. When we focus too closely on Kantian disinterestedness and beauty we miss most of the aesthetics of our daily interactions with the arts. And most importantly here, we completely miss the original premise of *aesthetics*, as it was coined just decades before Kant's revisions.

Baumgarten and Sensitive Cognition

Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) introduced his *aesthetics* in the last pages of his 1735 *Meditationes* (Aschenbrenner and Holther 1954), and defines it as the 'science of sensitive knowing' (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*), in the *Prolegomena* of his unfinished *Aesthetica* from 1750–58 (Baumgarten 1750). It is probably not coincidental that Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* was published in 1764, roughly contemporary with Baumgarten's passing and the posthumous publication of his lectures. Where Kant wanted to take the aesthetic response in the direction of beauty at the exclusion of other stimuli, Baumgarten saw beauty as but one avenue for his 'sensitive knowing' (his *aesthetica*).

This way of knowing is a gut-level knowing, through the senses rather than through logic and rational cognition, as he introduced it. Baumgarten based his *aesthetica* on the Greek *aisthesis* (αἴσθησις, sensation), as a contrast with *noesis* (νόησις, reason) (Åhlberg 2003). These two ways of knowing go hand in hand, something we lose sight of if we focus too narrowly on Kantian disinterestedness or limit the range of sensory cognition to beauty. Baumgarten's radical idea was that his new science has as its formal object of study sensory perceptions (things perceived, αἰσθητά) as distinguished from rational objects of inquiry (things known, νοητά).

Baumgarten gave us *aesthetics* to address a special kind of knowing, a knowing through our senses that takes place in addition to our rational knowing (through thinking about the world). Contemporary advertising theory, for example, embraces and exploits the manner in which sensory affect and rational cognition work together (Kuspit 2004: 80–81; Ruiz and Sicilia 2004; Sojka and Giese 1997; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). It is *how* poetry communicates, for example, that makes *what* it communicates different than descriptive prose. In music, for example, we are *moved* by Yo-Yo Ma playing Osvaldo Golijov's *Azul* at the Lincoln Center in New York City, and we are *moved* by Gerald Johnson and

Tim Woods playing Art Porter's *G* at the Afterthought Bar in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The study of aesthetics is the study of sensitive knowing; beauty is but one narrow corridor of such knowing. In his usual straight-forward manner John Clegg referred to the aesthetic response as a 'Funny Inner Feeling' (Clegg 1995: 4). This cuts through much of the confusion generated in response to Baumgarten:

When people are really turned on to an art work, they sometimes report a highly specific reaction. Houseman cut himself if a line of poetry (as opposed to verse) came into his head while he was shaving; others find their hair stands on end, shivers run up spines, or the pit of the stomach experiences insectidal invasions. Such reactions are sometimes called 'the aesthetic response', or, more lucidly, 'Funny Inner Feeling'. (Clegg 1995: 4)

These inner feelings are *funny* because they are hard to pin down, rationally. There are, of course, many more Funny Inner Feelings than just those provoked by beauty.

Many works of art 'are intentionally frightening, some sublime, others ugly, even grotesque.... [I]t makes sense to insist art and the aesthetic always belong together but not beauty. As the history of art shows, beauty is not a prerequisite for either art or the aesthetic' (Risatti 2007: 264). Awe is sometimes the desired aesthetic, as in the downright cataclysmic affect of JMW Turner's sublime, or the super-human scale of the Stonehenge sarsens, or the magnificent hypostyle halls at Karnak and Persepolis. In each of these cases monumentality and drama are intentionally manipulated by specific design choices that would have little meaning, for example, without the viewer's knowledge of gravity, and the weight and hardness of stone. Grace is the desired effect of a lot of art. And it has probably long been common to mock such grace with an uncouth, *punk* aesthetic, or with an intentionally mechanical *futurist* aesthetic.

Clean and crisp is an aesthetic that has resurfaced throughout human history, from the petaloid stone celts and semi-lunate polished axes from the pre-Columbian cultures of the Antilles and Brazil, to the crisp linework and flat fields of color and pattern of *yamato-e* painting from Heian handscrolls to today's Superflat graphics. And, of course, there is the super-clean, super-cool Apple Inc. *iAesthetic* that is well-known and much consumed. The enormous popularity of this *iAesthetic* has created a marketing dream come true: a community of armchair aesthetes unified by the Apple Inc. lifestyle—at least the *illusion* of a lifestyle—engendered by the emotional arousal of specific design and marketing choices.

The Aesthetics of Divine Potency

Menacing and spooky can be a desired aesthetic, as a lot of Medieval Christian and Buddhist art reminds us, from the emotive images of demons devouring souls in Last Judgment reliefs in France, to the fierce guardian figures defending Buddhist images in Japan. In these examples we see shared cultural underpinnings and religious devotion uniting a community of viewers. When people have a communal investment in specific iconography that is culturally vital—religious subject matter, in these cases—they are more likely to be moved deeply when it is convincingly expressed in the work of art. Considered in the pejorative as *groupthink*, this is when shared values and experiences overcome critical assessment and judgement to inspire action or conformity.

In addition to any formal qualities these powerful images may possess, the iconography of those shared belief systems move the devout in ways that can even result in spiritual conversion. The pull on one's soul to embrace a divine calling, when that affect is convincingly (i.e. meaningfully) enhanced by an image, is one of the most significant aesthetic responses known to us. Even in Western traditions the power of images to move people, to stimulate an *enactive* response, has a long history. The painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe hanging in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City is not simply something pretty to hang on a wall, its reception is anything but disinterested, and far from being useless, it is indispensable.

In fact, it was probably the potency of such intense aesthetic responses to the paintings and engravings used in religious ritual that led to early prohibitions against such images (especially figurative sculpture). Consider the foundational event at the heart of the Abrahamic faiths, the iconic articulation of Mosaic Law. The first commandment God delivered was simple and directly addressed the power of the singular godhead: There is only one God, and I am Him. The second most important thing to communicate, however, before killing, adultery, stealing and all manners of coveting, addressed the power of art. This was the prohibition against making figurative images (*graven*, or sculpted figures). Images equaled *presence* in the ancient Near East, as it did (does) among most people in most parts of the world for most of time. The physical interface between humans and the divine, as these ancient traditions understood, was the affective response to powerful images. It is difficult to disentangle the aesthetic response from this essential human dynamic, and it is insulting to imagine that such responses are the mere disinterested appreciation of beauty for its own sake.

The issue that needs to be considered is *how* the artist renders the subject matter that made up their common

culture. Artistry in such work is *always* in the service of the subject matter. That artist who best and most convincingly renders the subject matter to their viewers is the one most appreciated by their society, in the West and beyond, today and in prehistory. In short, the aesthetic dimension is directly connected to iconography. We may have lost sight of this as our notions of art and aesthetics have been too greatly influenced by modern ideas and Modern art, especially the abandonment of iconic subject matter heralded as the clarion call of Greenbergian Formalism. After all, Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1536-1541) is a powerful work of art *because* of how he renders its subject matter vis-à-vis its subject matter. In other words, artistry does not exist separate from subject matter and content. This has significant implications when we consider the role of iconography in the aesthetic reception of pre-Columbian rock art.

These aesthetic qualities can affect us in ways that directly inspire a visceral response. We are driven by something inside of us, apart from our rational cognition, to react to certain images physically. Turning to enactive theories of perception to explain this bodily awareness, Margaret Boden (2000) characterizes this physical reaction as an aesthetic response. Certain visual and tactile stimuli result in specific motor responses. Craft, for example, participates in an aesthetic that, unlike fine art, is directly connected to our physical bodies and how we sense (feel) the containment, covering or supporting craft objects fulfill. We *know* a good cup, coat or chair by feeling how it fulfills its purpose when we use it with/over/under our bodies (Boden 2000; Risatti 2007). We do not have to rationally consider any theory of containment, covering or supporting, nor do we need to decode any symbolic representation of a container, cover or support.

This is a different means of affecting an aesthetic response than the experience we expect from fine art. With fine art we have works 'whose function, in addition to referring and meaning, is to be beheld in the sense of gazing intently upon and contemplated' (Risatti 2007: 91). Fine art can have the aesthetic response itself as the purpose of that communication. In other words, works of fine art can enjoy an autonomy from external signification by means of the aesthetic as signification. This is the rare condition of 'art for art's sake' that seems to be the focus of most anti-art theories (Conkey et al. 1997; cf. Morales 2005a).

Case Studies in pre-Columbian Aesthetics and Rock Art

So when we consider the nature of art and aesthetics as summarized here, is there any possibility that everyday non-Western or prehistoric people had work

like our everyday art (including our fine art, craft and design)? From time to time may they have experienced the sensitive cognition of an aesthetic response to such works? Why not? Why shouldn't we begin with the premise that all human societies have the possibility for such work and sensitivity? Stephen H. Lekson (2008) takes a similar approach in his synthesis of Southwest prehistory and the archaeological theory that has shaped our understanding of it. I believe this attitude is the fairest way to approach the past. Why should we withhold from certain societies the very things we cherish so deeply in our own, like art? The following examples of pre-Columbian rock art (Figure 7) should demonstrate that sensitive cognition has been a part of American art for a very long time. Some of this rock art may in fact have intentionally exploited the aesthetic response, engaging the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Risatti 2007: 146) we expect of *fine art*.

The Angelim Style: Grace and Gesture

Angelim style painting from Brazil's *Nordeste* (Northeast) is characterized by its open-contours and gestural painting style (Morales 2002, 2005b). This distinct formal convention contrasts with most figurative

paintings in the region, which are commonly either in a refined miniature shorthand called the Nordeste tradition (Guidon 1984, 1989, 1995) or as larger, crudely painted figures called the Agreste tradition (Aguar 1986; Guidon 1984; cf. Calderón 1983a, 1983b). The miniature paintings are characterized by figures with lines or ovals for bodies and single lines for appendages—like stick-figure drawings found worldwide. A composition from the central highlands of Bahia (Figure 8) is an example of this Nordeste tradition. Larger, finger-painted figures (Figure 9), typically with bulbous proportions and unrefined draftsmanship define the most widespread painting tradition in the region, the Agreste tradition. But Angelim-style paintings are noticeably different. Angelim-style figures show an attention to brushwork—to the paintings *as paintings*—that sets them apart from these other styles (Morales 2002, 2005b).

The large polychrome cervid from Morro das Figuras do Angical, in the remote northern reaches of Serra da Capivara National Park, represents a typical Angelim-style painting (Figure 10). The solid-oval torsos and linear appendages typical in the Serra da Capivara style, for example, are replaced by carefully drafted contour lines. Appendages are highlighted with yellow,



Figure 7. Map of Central and South America showing the locations of the rock art discussed (from right to left): the central highlands of Bahia, Brazil; Serra da Capivara National Park in Piauí, Brazil; Anguilla; Puerto Rico; and western Cuba (adapted from Jet Propulsion Laboratory 2010).

finger-painted lines, then only certain contours were outlined with thin, red lines. The line quality is remarkably consistent despite the irregular surface; some lines almost appear to be single, sweeping gestures. This delicacy of the long, gestural curves, and the open-ended, sometimes fluted appendages, are hallmarks of the Angelim-style (Morales 2002, 2005b). The entire form of the galloping cervid was expressed with only a few lines carefully preconceived to maintain the integrity of the overall form and, we argue, to call attention to *how* it was painted. This figure, like Angelim style paintings throughout the region, reveals sophisticated design considerations and highly refined draftsmanship and brushwork. The paintings of this style are *remarquablement soignée* (Pessis 1987: 270).

The formal decisions made by the painter, specifically the expressive brushwork, certainly must have affected *how* this common iconography is communicated. This was a world where people were used to seeing painted rockshelter walls, and used to seeing painted cervids everywhere. These particular paintings must have stood out, not because of what was painted, but because of the *how* this important subject matter was painted. Perhaps seeing these paintings *as paintings* was the point (or a significant part of it). We must keep in mind that these were not just painters influenced by the world

around them, they were also painters influenced by the artworld around them. One does not have to conjure the rare extreme of an *art for art's sake* to recognize that sometimes the manner in which something is done can carry meaning (Stone 2005; Winter 1998, 2002), including the intentional manipulation of aesthetic sensibilities.

A painted rhea from central Bahia shares this gestural aesthetic (Figure 11). The curve of the rhea's contours are a series of very deliberate, carefully executed lines. With more than two dozen painted shelters in the vicinity, this composition would have been one of many known to its prehistoric audience. In addition to its symbolic content, could this painting have been recognized as among the most graceful of the local paintings? If painting worked in prehistory as it does now, the graceful aesthetic probably enhanced the meaning, especially if rheas carried spiritual significance to the pre-contact hunters in this polychrome *sertão*. The problem is that our only direct evidence is the painting itself. And if we cannot easily articulate the formal qualities that qualify works as *art* (see Dickie and Danto) or those which inspired aesthetic responses (since sensitive cognition does not preserve well, archaeologically), then how are we to make such judgments? How do we look for a prehistoric American artworld?

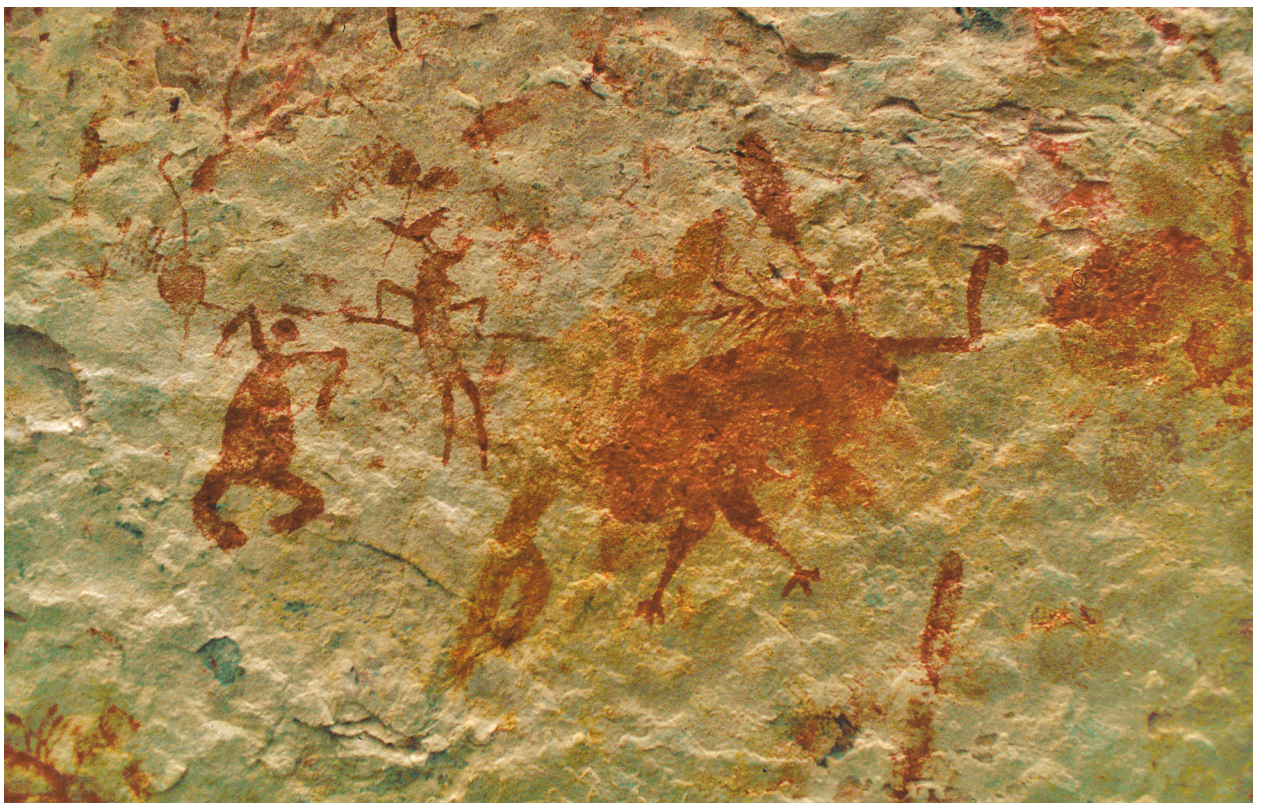


Figure 8. Group of Nordeste tradition miniatures from the central highlands of Bahia, Brazil. Central anthropomorph ca. 10 cm tall, with the thinnest painted lines 1-2 mm wide.



Figure 9. Composition of finger-painted Agreste tradition figures from the central highlands of Bahia, Brazil. Large cervid ca. 74 cm long, with most finger-painted lines 8-10 mm wide.



Figure 10. Angelim style cervid from Morro das Figuras do Angical, Serra da Capivara National Park, Piauí, Brazil. Cervid ca. 108 cm long, most contour lines 3-4 mm wide.



Figure 11. Angelim style rhea from the central highlands of Bahia. Rhea ca. 45 cm long; average line width 3–4 mm (enhanced for clarity).

We are lucky in Brazil because a substantial ethnographic record of living tradition exists from which we can glean analogies for the production and reception of prehistoric art. Modern anthropology has brought us indigenous voices that are difficult to ignore. Pedro Agostinho (2000, 2001, personal communications) makes it very clear that the Kamayurá, one of a group of independent polities in the protected Upper Xingu culture area, are very proud of their art, take great care in its production, and make clear distinctions between beautiful and ugly work (see also Agostinho 1974a, 1974b).

Another Upper Xingú group, the Mehinaku, have similar attitudes and are known to engage in a sophisticated critical discourse when discussing beautifully ornamented (*kawushapaitsi*) and poorly ornamented (*mawushapawa*) works. Like artworlds we are familiar with, in this Mehinaku artworld they ‘admire well-executed designs and attractive ornaments’ (Gregor 1977: 155). Mehinaku paintings are ‘subject to criticism if they are done poorly. No mere embellishment or ornamentation, they become an intrinsic part of the object that is decorated.... Even a mundane object like a pot is regarded as incomplete without its appropriate design’ (Gregor 1977: 37). Some painting is even

appreciated for its *beauty* (Gregor 1977: 153–176), which would have made Kant happy if not for the utility of these beautiful works.

Similar aesthetic discourse is alive and well among the Wauja, who have strong opinions about good and bad art, drawing a clear distinction between *awöjötöpapai* (beautiful) and *aitsawöjötöpapai* (ugly) works. They also draw a distinction between difficult, *ehejuapai*, and not-difficult, *aitsaehejuapai*, painting (Barcelos 1999, 2005). These attitudes go far beyond the merely pleasurable reception of their artistic production, they are vital distinctions reinforcing the connection their art creates between humans and supernaturals. The works that exhibit the most *awöjötöpapai* will be chosen for use in the most important ritual settings, being capable of affecting the spirits called *apapaatai*. These excellent works have the capacity to contribute *kotepemonapai* (happiness) to the intercourse between our world and the *ekwimyatipa*, the realm of spirits and ancestors.

Mediocre art, *aitsaehejuapai* and *aitsawöjötöpapai*, is destined to stay in the sphere of everyday use, or worse, be relegated to the profane realm of ethnokitch and sold at the Indian Post to European tourists (Barcelos 2005). This is a fully functioning

Amazonian artworld, replete with fine art, experienced artists (with strict apprenticeship requirements), sophisticated (sometimes brutal) critics and criticism, juried exhibiting, plenty of room for everyday art, and even a gift shop near the exit. Similar artworlds with their own local dynamics are shared by the Kaxinawá (Lagrou 1991), Kayapó-Xikrin (Menezes Bastos 1996), and Kalapalo (Basso 1985). In the living Amazon, *art* is the rule rather than the exception.

So considering these Angelim-style paintings in the Nordeste, would it not be reasonable to infer that such a distinct style among styles was recognized as the index of talented painters working among many other painters in a pre-contact artworld? Among hundreds of painted cervids and rheas, could these paintings have stood out by means of their *visual affect*? The more reasonable question to ask is why should we think otherwise? Why should we begin with the assumption that the attitudes and practices we see thriving in the Upper Xingu artworld today, for one example, are simply recent cultural developments? Why would artworlds have had no place in these communities before European colonization? Michael J. Heckenberger (1996, 1998) argues that these Upper Xingu cultural patterns may have appeared as early as the tenth or eleventh century, coincidentally, about the time Ottonian artists in Europe began to rediscover monumental sculpture in wood and bronze, the first pangs of their artistic *renaissance*. When Karl von den Steinen documented the arts of the Upper Xingu in the 1880s, he introduced European audiences to an artworld that was thriving and sophisticated. The well-developed aesthetic sensibilities we see in these living artworlds enjoy very ancient roots, something we see in Angelim-style rock art.

Antillean Cave Art: Spooky and Menacing

Rock art in the Caribbean includes every manner of painting, drawing and engraving in caves and open-air sites. One class of engravings occur on secondary cave formations like stalactites, stalagmites and flowstones. Some of these result in vivid, high-relief images, like the menacing face from western Cuba (now damaged by recent machete modification; Figure 12). Others, such as those on a flowstone wall in southern Puerto Rico (Figure 13), take the form of minimally suggested, low relief faces. These faces take advantage of the dim, raking light in this part of the cave. They are simple two- or three-dot face images, some with, some without clear circle outlines and clearly articulated mouths. Notice in the example from Puerto Rico the shallow engraved marks placed in areas where the indirect illumination strikes the flowstone at an angle, near the edge of the shadowed areas. This allows a subtle play of shadow and light, giving us just the hint of a face image.

Sometimes, as in a central Jamaican cave (Figure 14), high and low relief engraving combines to create an apparent morass of relief imagery. Eyes and faces merge with meandering linear elements to confound easy recognition of the iconography. Other times, as in an example from Anguilla (Figure 15), the modifications are limited, yet effective at anthropomorphizing the natural formation, turning the speleothem into an *ersatz* torso, borrowing Andrea Stone's description of mainland examples (Stone 2005). This has the visual effect of transforming the cave from mere passive support into an integral part of the imagery. Here, in this Anguillan example, a little art goes a long way in reminding us of the role of caves among the pre-Columbian populations who used them (Morales and Quesenberry 2005).

The Caribbean cultural centers from Trinidad to Jamaica to the Bahamas were important hubs in networks that exploited connections between islands and certainly between the neighboring South, Central and North American mainlands. Throughout the Antillean archipelago caves were the locations of powerful supernatural forces and ancestral agents, and they were the conduits through which one accessed those forces and communicated with those agents. Image making seems to have been a necessary component of these activities. The art at the heart of these rituals was uniquely suited for this Underworldly context (Morales and Quesenberry 2005). And, as we argue here, a key component of that vitality was the intentionally manipulated physiological reality of interacting with art in darkness: the gut-level reaction that alters our perception of specific imagery in the low-light, hyper-sensitive, conditions caves uniquely offer (Morales 2019; see also Stone 2005).

Think of these caves as coming layered with symbolism; they were well-known as places where the natural and the supernatural come together. This is the cultural cave context, the cave as signifier. There is a distinct perceptual context as well. Our bodies—our senses—react to the space of the cave. The reaction to carved imagery in low-light galleries amidst convoluted cave formations is consistent with what Alexander Baumgarten certainly had in mind with his *aesthetic*. Sensitive cognition is key: in this artworld the symbolic and sensate come together with image making to create a heightened liminality, a uniquely informed knowing. In the fascinating context of modified speleothem sculpture, sense is as informative as symbol. This is where the gut and mind meet, in some cases creating a delicate balance, a kind of hovering between natural stimulus and cultural conditioning that activates or charges the space with a unique ritual potency, 'a worlding... like no other' (Risatti 2007: 202).

If we have a visceral reaction when looking at this rock art *in situ*, if it effects us almost at a gut level, there are



Figure 12. Modified speleothem from western Cuba. Lighter areas indicated recent damage from machete modifications. Speleothem ca. 280 cm tall, face ca. 36 cm tall.



Figure 13. Flowstone with engraved face motifs from southern Puerto Rico. Faces ca. 12–15 cm tall.



Figure 14. Central Jamaican speleothem with almost a dozen pairs of eye motifs, some in sunken relief, some with concentric outlines, and at least one that appears to have been modified into a zoomorphic figure. Speleothem ca. 110 cm tall, largest eyes ca. 8–10 cm apart.



Figure 15. Large anthropomorphized speleothem from Anguilla showing how the modifications take advantage of natural forms to suggest a figure. Speleothem ca. 2 m tall, 'head' c. 35 cm wide.

probably very good reasons. Recent research in the field of neuroaesthetics is focusing new technology on investigating how our brains are wired to react to certain kinds of imagery differently (Zeki and Kawabata 2004). Combine this neurophysical reaction to face stimuli with the dark environs of a cave, and consider how some speleothem art only appears after our eyes adjust to the low light. This has the effect of sometimes menacing faces appearing out of nowhere, which could cause quite an *affect*. Such an appearance would certainly stimulate more than just the interpretive response that rational psychological processes elicit. It might elicit Boden's enactive perception—perception that directly stimulates a *gut* reaction (motor response).

Now overlay this sensitive cognition with the culturally informed symbolic association that caves had in ancient Antillean cultures and the result is a unique interplay of art and environment, culture and nature. Stone (2005) proposes that the rough aesthetic of some cave art intentionally played upon the natural *caveness* of this imagery. With the boundaries clouded by highly sculptural examples, we have instances where the perception of these faces might hover between the symbolic and the visceral—a worlding of a sort that cannot be explained by rational processes alone (Morales 2019).

This allows for a mode of communication beyond a simple signifier-signified relationship, that of a face-to-face human encounter. Walter Benjamin's (1969) notion of *aura* seems especially appropriate here: there is a special experience of art and cave that seems exponentially greater than merely the sum of art-plus-cave. This is part of what makes modified speleothem sculpture a significant class of pre-Columbian art. It exposes levels of American Indian aesthetic sensibility and sophistication not commonly acknowledged in contemporary scholarship (Waldron 2010 is a welcome exception). In this sense, the cave is not unlike the gothic cathedral in that the art and space come together to infuse each other with a sacred aura that enhances both.

Back to Art, Back to Baumgarten

We argue that we should consider these South and Central American cultures to have had no less a capacity for art and aesthetic discourse than we in the Modern West enjoy. We should allow for the creation of work 'against the background of [an] artworld' (Dickie 1989: 200). To be fair, we

should allow for *many* sophisticated pre-Columbian artworlds. We should begin by assuming that these societies had the same capacity as us for sophisticated visual expression, and that they paid attention to the subtle exploitation of the visually affective potential of this communication.

Long-established Old World artworlds probably accompanied the first societies who walked and floated into the New World at the waning of the Pleistocene (perhaps earlier). Art did not arrive in the Americas on board Spanish carracks and caravels, although tons departed that way. We can argue about the autonomous value of the remaining works we have from those First American artworlds *vis à vis* the way they have been promoted (or demoted) variously as fine art or non-art in modern museums. But we cannot reasonably argue those artworlds didn't exist. Art is just as apt in the critical discourse of these works as it is with that of modern works (for better or worse, as Alfred Gell's [1996] reaction to a poorly embalmed shark in a London gallery demonstrated).

Just as we can no longer tolerate claims that some societies are *primitive* (e.g., Joplin 1971) or *savage* (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1962), no longer can we afford offhand claims like art is just 'something pretty to hang on a wall'—we now understand how the arts were 'central to and permeated all social relations' (Lekson 2008: 328, n. 68) throughout prehistory as throughout history (see also Munson 2011). Trends in Latin American Studies are turning critically needed focus on issues very much like these (Fisher 2005; Mosquera 2005). When we seek to understand the full world of prehistoric cultural diversity in the Americas, it seems most respectful to honestly evaluate how art 'satisfies the aesthetic, cultural, social and communicative demands of the community from and for which it is made' (Mosquera 2005: 221).

The brief Amazonian examples I mentioned above are characteristic of much broader aesthetic sensibilities across the non-Western world. Students of Chinese art have been studying Hsieh Ho's aesthetic discourse for fifteen hundred years and are well aware of his Spirit Resonance, the most important quality in great painting (Acker 1954; Hsieh 1967). The discussion of *shimmering* in Warlpiri and Yolngu arts from Australia recognizes the aesthetic affect stimulated by certain patterns and the juxtaposition of certain colors (Clegg 2005; Dussart 1997; Morphy 1992).

Babatunde Lawal writes eloquently on Yoruba art and aesthetics and provides insight into these West African traditions, some of which are very ancient. The Yoruba are just as capable of sophisticated artistic practices and critical aesthetic discourse as any Enlightened European tradition. On one level, satisfying any

remaining Kantian fetishization of The Beautiful as a condition of aesthetic sensibility, we have the Yoruba saying, "Ojó a kú là á d'ère, èniyàn sunwòn láàyè" (It is death that turns an individual into a beautiful sculpture; a living person has blemishes)' (Lawal 2001: 513). But even the sense of beauty in Yoruba aesthetics is not simple visual satisfaction:

What attracts and nourishes the eyes (*ojú*) is the *ewà* (beauty), *isòna* (creativity), or *àrà* (tour de force) manifested in a given spectacle, portrait, or a work of art in general. Any striking evidence of the beautiful or the virtuosic is said to *fa ojú móra* (magnetize the eyes), *bá ojú mu* (fit the eyes), becoming *àwòwò-túnwò* (that which compels repeated gaze) or *àwómá-leèlò* (that which moors the gaze).... An image is designated *àwòyanu* (literally, that which causes the viewer to gape) if it manifests such an incredibly high artistic skill as to suggest the use of occult powers (Lawal 2001: 517)

Yoruba arts from West Africa, like the traditions from Australia or China just mentioned, provide examples of the many non-Western artworlds where art and aesthetic discourse is alive and has apparently been for some time. And this art is clearly *not* useless or impotent. We propose the same possibilities for the ancient Americas.

M. Jane Young has addressed a Zuni aesthetic of accumulation (Young 1988), citing the earlier work of Barbara Tedlock on the beautiful and the dangerous in Zuni symbolism (Tedlock 1984). James Farmer (2001) has pointed out how Barrier Canyon-style rock art, some of the most sophisticated painting in pre-Columbian North America, engages monumentality and miniaturism simultaneously in some compositions, forcing a type of choreographed interaction with the imagery. Large groups of figures that can be seen from over a kilometer away—and the cavernous alcoves that were sometimes chosen to host these murals—dwarf the human spectator in a very theatrical engagement of the senses. The exploitation of monumentality such as this has a long history in human expression, and for very good reason: it *works*.

In some American Indian rock art we see the exploitation of visually affective form in the service of deeply important imagery. It is reasonable to conclude that it was designed 'to be beheld in the sense of gazing intently upon and contemplated' (Risatti 2007: 91). This intentional *to-be-looked-at-ness* is consistent with what we expect of *fine* art (Risatti 2007). The probability exists, therefore, that some pre-Columbian rock art was not only art, but fine art. Some may have provided the stimulus for the occasional contemplation of the aesthetic, not for its own sake necessarily, but as we usually encounter it in our modern artworlds, i.e., for

the sake of enhancing communicative effectiveness through emotional affect. Those objects that engendered the greatest aesthetic response in the pre-Columbian viewer would have been the most powerful objects to those cultures. In other words, great Pre-Columbian works of art, like art in all cultures, are great art because they convey their messages most powerfully to their Pre-Columbian viewers.

The nascent field of neuroaesthetic research appears to confirm the hypothesis that aesthetic sensibility, at one level, is an innate response, an essential aspect of human cognition (Winter 2002; Zeki and Kawabata 2004). This seems to support not only art's interhumanity (Kuspit 2004: 192), but considering the 'inseparability of cognition from sensation' (Winter 2002: 18), may indeed be the bridge between culture and nature we as biological beings must cross to be human beings. Perhaps the reason we have such a hard time defining art is because it is art that defines us.

Smart art theory should not exclude some art just because it destabilizes a presumed center by challenging a comfortable canon (whether that canon is held in esteem or as a rhetorical prop, a focus of derision). Art is not European and art is not modern, art is interhuman and art is persistent. Art is almost synonymous with humanity, it seems. Fine art is what happens when we make the most of that, when we draw attention to the visually and emotionally affective qualities of our work. We have probably been doing this for a long time — perhaps all time. American Indian rock art is no less an expression of this 'universal category of human existence' (White 1992: 538) than any other great tradition and deserves the same theoretical respect and critical sensitivity we heave upon the most lauded and glorified Western art. In the beginning, there may not have been the word *art*, but there was probably art. We've had it ever since. It would be most productive to acknowledge this and move on with our work.

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